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**Author(s):** Ramos, Octavio Jr

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## Employee Spotlight: Riz Ali

Candidly capturing the cityscapes of the world



It can happen at any time, and that is the main reason why there is always a camera nearby for Rizwan “Riz” Ali, Director of the National Security Research Center. Riz is an avid photographer, one who rarely takes time to compose a photograph, instead relying on instinct and the right moment to capture an often-stunning scene.

A while back, Riz was driving back from a visit to White Sands National Park when he chanced upon a railroad crossing in Encino, a village in Torrance County. The area had been hit with an intense thunderstorm, and Riz was enthralled with the thick clouds that remained in the sky. Leaving his bemused family in the car, Riz ran out and took a photograph of the breathtaking landscape.

“As I composed the photo, heavy gusts of wind almost knocked me off my feet several times,” Riz remembers with a smile.

In another photo, Riz captured the shape of what looked like a heart, which he found while hiking the Upper Antelope Canyon in the Navajo Nation. Riz found this area with the help of an experienced guide.

Riz explains, “I took that photo in stark black and white to accentuate the lines, textures and contrast between the light and dark parts of the scene.”



**Photo caption:** Riz Ali’s photograph of a railroad crossing in Encino, New Mexico. Look for the telltale hints of a storm that had just passed through the area.



**Photo caption:** Riz took this photo while exploring the Upper Antelope Canyon. There are no effects or other “sweeteners” (such as digital effects) in this photo — it is a candid shot taken in black and white.

### **The allure of urban photography**

Riz’s interest in photography goes as far back as he can remember. To hone his skills, he took various classes in photography and art appreciation while in college. But what really got Riz going in photography was a genre originally known as street photography, which today is more commonly labeled urban photography.

In essence, this type of photography involves taking photos of various subjects in city environments. Themes range from capturing how people interact within urban landscapes to capturing the aesthetics of urban geometry — the often curious shapes that make up a city scene. This genre of photography began during the “golden age” of photography, from 1890 to the 1970s, when camera technology made it possible for artists to take high-quality photos without being confined to a studio.

“I have always been drawn to cameras and the photographs they produce,” says Riz. “It wasn’t until seven or eight years ago, though, when I really started paying more attention to the compositional value of photos and seeing them more as art rather than merely snapshots.”

Before coming to Los Alamos, Riz served 30 years in the United States Air Force, which gave him a chance to travel around the world. When not on duty, Riz took to the city streets of places like Prague in the Czech Republic, Munich in Germany and Cordoba in southern Spain.

While walking through such foreign cityscapes, Riz would let his thoughts flow freely, letting a certain scene dictate a possible idea for a photograph. Sometimes, a scene will appear before him, and it is up to Riz to capture it before it disappears forever. One such example took place while Riz was working in Munich for NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

“I was walking through a central square in Munich known as Marienplatz,” Riz explains, “when I happened across a curious scene. There were several strong diagonal lines made by shadows along the structure’s windows, which seemed to follow the pattern on the door. As the figures walked through the scene, I immediately snapped the shot when I felt they were in the proper compositional position. A few seconds after I took the photo, clouds came through and the

shadows were gone. When the Sun did return about 30 minutes later, the shadows were no longer in the right position for me to take additional pictures. The moment had passed and this was the only image I was able to capture in this location.”

Other times, a concept or idea proves much more elusive, and Riz must spend quite a bit of time taking photographs until one captures his fancy. One such example was while Riz and his family were visiting Cordoba, Spain, during the winter of 2016.

“We were staying in the Jewish Quarter of the central part of the city,” says Riz. “I stood on a hotel balcony, which overlooked a crosswalk. Over the course of three nights, I must have spent nearly 10 hours on this balcony taking pictures of interesting people, bicycles and vehicles. During this time I captured a picture of a man walking along with his traveling suitcase — this photograph is by far one of my favorites.”



**Photo caption:** Riz took this photograph just when the shadows seemed to complement the pattern on the door. The moment was gone soon enough, and Riz found that this effect did not return again.



**Photo caption:** One of Riz’s favorite photographs, this black-and-white composition was featured in one of his photographic art exhibitions in Belgium.



**Photo caption:** Riz captured this scene while he and his family were visiting Prague in the Czech Republic during the Christmas season. Riz snapped the photo at a decisive moment, capturing a blurred silhouette walking along a city street. The resultant effect is of a shadow seemingly taking on a ghostly, three-dimensional shape.

### **Spontaneity and realism are key**

**Pull Quote:** “I don’t ever plan out my photography at all. When I see something that captures my attention, I take the photo. It’s extremely rare that I will take an image of a scene more than once. I do not take multiple photos from different perspectives or angles — it’s simply not my style. For me, it’s always about feeling — if something strikes me, I capture it in a photograph.”

Some photographers take pains to compose their images, but Riz prefers to rely on his intuition.

“It’s gut instinct,” says Riz. “Many times I really don’t know what the image looks like until I have the photo on my computer for final editing. During this time, I study each image and try to remember why I took it. Sometimes it’s obvious, but other times I do some thinking before I realize the reasons of why I snapped the shot in the first place.”

When it comes to editing images digitally, Riz prefers not to embellish his images with any type of digital effects or other “sweeteners” to enhance or customize it. Rather, he emphasizes using computer corrections to “balance” the image, so any photographic flaws are minimized and the image is captured as perfectly as possible.

“I do not like embellishment or manipulation of images,” says Riz. “The world as it presents itself to me is what gives me the most satisfaction when it comes to my photography.”



**Photo caption:** Riz Ali uses software on his computer to correct photographic imperfections on an image.

*Rizwan “Riz” Ali serves as the Director of the National Security Research Center. Riz joined the Laboratory in 2018, initially hired as the group leader for the Secure Information Services group in the for the Weapons Research Services Division.*

## **Resources**

[Riz Ali Photograpy Site](#)

[How to Start Shooting Great Urban Photography](#)